

Sketch

Volume 74, Number 1

2009

Article 40

Riding and Refocusing

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Riding and Refocusing

Ryan Pesch

Hoosier Pass has an elevation of 11,539 feet, which I decide warrants a stop since I am responsible for climbing every one of those nearly 140,000 inches, having started at the Pacific a few weeks earlier. This is the highest point of my journey, and I abandon my bike temporarily to lie down next to the sign proclaiming my accomplishment to have a snack. I take a jar of Nutella and spread some chocolate on a bland oat granola bar. Afforded some time after the straining and sweating of the climb, I savor the taste of this simple combination.

If there is a God, it seems to me obvious he must be one of chocolate. Not that the Nutella I am consuming on this mountain in Colorado would have a different taste or anything, but its flavor is so pleasing to me that it borders on a religious experience. The fact that the taste affects me so, the hazelnut undertone poking through the richness now and then, points to a benevolent creator indeed. There are moments every so often when I doubt this benevolence, when I am not reveling in a Klondike Bar or relishing a piece of dark German chocolate. There are times I look down from whatever mountain I am on and imagine starving faces looking up, helpless below as we all might appear to a Higher Being. And when infants die of starvation before they are given the chance to prove their worth, I doubt this God (since at these times I am not eating chocolate on a mountainside), and wonder how so many can take comfort in his tyranny.

But this time, as I scrape the bottom of the jar for the last hint of divinity, I remember something I read:

You know, as a young man Hitler was rejected from art school, and if you've seen any of his paintings you know they're awful. What I'm trying to say is that maybe there is a God, but he's a real art lover.

And it seems clear that I don't have to deny his existence any more, but rather, can take my love of chocolate as an indication of his chocolate-loving presence. And as I swing my leg over my bike, ready for the twenty miles of coasting ahead, I am afforded time to think. The wind blurs my senses, the buffeting crosswind thumping my eardrums as the still air whirs by on the other side at 30 mph. I'm not so different. Everyone chooses their conception of God. Is it necessary, I think, as one grows older and learns of the history of suffering to cling to the idea of perfection? How? It's not possible. But there is chocolate, and there are mountains, and even though many people are not happy, will not be happy, I can enjoy them.

The road is straight after a few miles, gradually flattening out into fields, and I can see my next landmark long before I pedal softly into the town. A pastor gives me directions, and as I turn his “God bless you” follows me away. I pat my pocket, reassuringly feeling the chocolate bar I stashed there earlier, and consider his blessing unneeded as I cross the border into Kansas.

I leave the small town, and the first thing I notice is the boxcars. Lots of them.

Miles and miles of empty boxcars line the side of the road. It occurs to me that the road was probably built next to the railroad tracks, and not the other way around, but now the boxcars are defined in terms of the causeway that still shows some slight signs of movement.

The boxcars never move. They are defunct, inefficient, and not even worth hauling to a yard somewhere to wait. Stored out here on this empty Kansas plain, they are forgotten. It’s a safe bet that not even the motorists notice just how many there are. Nobody uses this road for long. It’s just a backroad by the tracks with a slower speed limit than an interstate and a rougher ride. Which is, of course, why I’m biking here.

My tire punctures, and I look at the guilty thistle with no small amount of irritation. I thought thistles were supposed to sink into clothing and bike tires as a means of locomotion, to populate new areas. But out here everywhere is thistles, so what’s the point of them letting the air out of my bike tire? I can’t think of one. And neither is there a use for these boxcars, derelict monsters so used to labor and long days now sitting abandoned and unappreciated. Unnoticed masses, completely invisible to those now sitting on the mountain I left earlier. I stop and repair the tire before sitting in one of the cars to eat some chocolate before my last push of the day.

I exert myself to the point where things lose coherency. I stop thinking about the insignificant, content to live as an individual, and to appreciate the smaller scale. I lose myself in the pedal strokes, the simplicity of traveling under my own power. The boxcars blur as my eyes stop noticing their individuality, focusing instead on the particularities of the scenery. Instead of plains and fields I see individual plants. Instead of train cars I see flashes of graffiti standing out from the constant line on my left.

You know in the *Matrix* movies where Neo battles about a million people at once and everything slows down for the awesome moments of impact? Or maybe in *300* when the camera lingers on the hacking of limbs

so the spatters of blood float gently through the air while the severed leg rotates at a slightly different speed than the body--which is also spinning, but on a different axis--as though taking a pratfall on a banana peel? Well this is like that, except nobody is dying and nothing cool is happening. It's just a random stretch of road in Kansas, and I would have delighted in it passing unnoticed, but for this bit of time at the end of 200 miles, my conception of movement is not obliging. The pause in action is not accompanied by the camera zooming out and panning around to show the random objects paused in mid-air, and the birds haven't halted mid-flap, looking stranded in the sky. The bugs continue to collide with my arms and teeth with their miniature, meteor-style impacts, but through it all is an eerie hush, the space between sound waves expanding while the sun closes the gap to the horizon.

The bike's wheels beneath me keep humming, vibrations keep shivering up the frame, but the miles behind have numbed me to the extent that even these subtle reminders of time's passing go unnoticed. It has been almost a hundred miles since I crossed the border and since then it has been a steady study in efficiency. Sidling past a cemetery, I notice a motorcyclist in a skull and crossbones shirt standing over a tombstone in the middle of nowhere, and the black of his clothing makes the bones seem to float over the grave, his Harley in the background.

I already miss Colorado, where the miles broke apart and distinguished themselves from one another. When a mountain pass led to a quiet valley with cranes tiptoeing through grass and the promise of elk and moose nearby. Even the hard work of climbing was more welcome than the drudging flatline of Kansas' highway system. But I have an objective in mind for this day, and would have been oblivious to the beauty of better scenery by the time the sun stretched and bled out into the surrounding blue. The odometer ticks tenths away, and too soon the feeling fades, leaving me alone as things return to movement, my fatigue no longer forgotten behind the mask of endorphins. I accelerate with time, pushing harder for the last miles, seeking again that state of sublime stillness, but all I achieve is the conclusion, and I dismount, content with my accomplishment.